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Student Representative Submission on Proposed Changes to Graduate Attributes

This submission on the proposed changes to graduate attributes, as set out and discussed in the Report of the Working Party on Graduate Attributes, is made on behalf of 2012 class and faculty student representatives at Victoria University of Wellington. It also includes input from other interested students. It has been prepared by Jayendra Chhana, Education Organiser for the Victoria University Students Association (VUWSA).

In gathering student opinion for this submission, the following process was implemented:
1. An online submission form for students to submit an opinion. With the Working Party report in mind, the form asked students for their perspectives on both the proposed changes to graduate attributes and current university values.
2. All Class Reps were sent a request to provide their views through the online submission form. We also asked reps to pass the survey on to students in their classes. Additionally links were created to the submission form through the VUWSA 'Out for Consultation page' and VUWSA's facebook page.

Overall, 173 students responded to this process. As such, students expressed strong support for the proposed new graduate attributes. Current university values, for the most part, were similarly supported. However, points of student concern should be discussed further, most notably the inclusion of autonomy as a new graduate attribute with respect to its specific meaning and subsequent implementation within the learning environment. Some consideration should also be given as regards the communication of graduate attributes and their subsequent application to the student body at large.

Graduate Attributes

In this question, a list of the existing graduate attributes was provided to compare against the proposed changes.

Creative and Critical Thinking:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (67%) and agree (27%) on a five point likert), and with little deviation in student submissions, responding students expressed strong support for creative and critical thinking as a key graduate attribute.

Some thought, though, might be given to the inclusion of both critical and creative thinking within the same attribute and whether they would have received similar support if they had been set down as individual attributes:

"I think that combining Creative and Critical thinking is a misnomer. I would've clicked disagree on Creative thinking, but strongly agree on Critical thinking. Even in areas like Political Science and other academic Humanities subjects, there's not that much creativity to be done."

Regarding the statement above, it might also be worth reflecting on the extent of awareness on the part of students as to the actual terms of "critical" and "creative" thinking.

Communication:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (59%) and agree (32%) on a five point likert), and with little deviation in student submissions, responding students expressed strong support for communication as a key graduate attribute.

Autonomy:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (29%) and agree (34%) on a five point likert) responding students expressed support for autonomy as a key graduate attribute. However, a notable deviation in student submissions and a number of neutral responses (25%) suggest some reservation in this support.

A possibility for this reservation is a perceived vagueness to the value of autonomy – one that is in notable contrast to the seemingly stronger and more straight forward idea of leadership, one of the attributes which is to be replaced:

"Leadership should remain a graduate attribute. "Autonomy" is odd and doesnot reflect "academic identity". Most undergraduate students don't really develop an "academic identity". If leadership is to be replaced then I think it should be replaced with something to do with citizenship (critic of and participant in society - understanding NZ identity, makes contribution etc)."

"Unsure what 'autonomy' means - do they mean the ability to work and seek information independently? If so then I agree, but it seems strangely worded."

"I think leadership should stay. I identify strongly with it and believe that it should be an attribute that we try and encourage in our graduates."

On the other hand, the relevance of leadership as a graduate attribute is also questioned:

"I agree leadership is not a trait many graduates would attain. Leadership cannot simply be learned or taught, leadership is a personality , it is who we are , how we do things, our own initiative, our desire to do things for others, and be successful in everything we do and inspire others to follow suit."

"AUTONOMY is entirely separate from LEADERSHIP. I do not support leadership. I support autonomy."

Current Values:

In relation to this question, it was stated that the university was going to maintain this current set of values.

Academic Freedom:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (53%) and agree (34%) on a five point likert), and with little deviation in student submissions, responding students expressed strong support for value of academic freedom.

Excellence in All of Our Activities:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (47%) and agree (36%) on a five point likert), and with little deviation in student submissions, responding students expressed strong support for the value of general excellence.

Knowledge and Expertise:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (64%) and agree (32%) on a five point likert), and with little deviation in student submissions, responding students expressed strong support for the value of knowledge and expertise.

The Treaty of Waitangi:

On average (and clustering around neutral (36%) and agree (26%) on a five point likert), responding students expressed a somewhat reserved support for the Treaty of Waitangi as a relevant source of values. To some extent this reservation might be sourced to more general reservations over the Treaty's contemporary relevance.

Internationalisation:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (31%) and agree (40%) on a five point likert) responding students expressed support for the value of internationalisation. However, a notable deviation in student submissions suggests some reservation in this support. Unfortunately, the student comments do not elaborate on the source of this reservation.

Accountability:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (43%) and agree (41%) on a five point likert), and with little deviation in student submissions, responding students expressed strong support for value of accountability.

Honesty and Respect:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (68%) and agree (25%) on a five point likert), and with little deviation in student submissions, responding students expressed strong support for values of honest and respect.

Equity:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (56%) and agree (31%) on a five point likert) responding students expressed support for the value of equity. However, a notable deviation in student submissions suggests some reservation in this support, though its sources remain unclear given the lack of suitable qualitative data.

A Strong University Community:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (44%) and agree (33%) on a five point likert) responding students expressed support for the idea of maintaining a strong university community. However, a notable deviation in student submissions suggests some reservation in this support. Possible causes to this reservation include both a perceived lack of progress in the university's fostering of this value a present, and a tendency to equate "community", in some instances at least, to "exclusion".

"I don't feel like I'm in a strong university community, however I also feel like not having that has made me more independent. I also feel this community culture could lead to the exclusion of those that do not wish to, or cannot, participate in university community activities and roles"

However, both a keenness for this idea, and an awareness of its potential should also be observed here, as well as a desire to take advantage of managed opportunities provided by the university to engage socially.

"As far as developing values goes, and the importance of teaching young people these days especially the value of community, as well as all the other above values, such an opportunity of collaboration across at least all undergraduate year levels would be especially valuable and the potential benefits enormous. For example, the language students used to have individual language study rooms where only that language was to be spoken, otherwise these were for silent study. With recent cost cutting measures and/or expansion, these study rooms were lost to other administrative purposes. This was a great loss to all the hundreds of students that used these rooms regularly and gained huge benefit from the opportunity to discuss their subject matter (where appropriate) with what became their peers. The more advanced students were always more than happy to assist with questions and lively, constructive debate often also ensured. The atmosphere was ALWAYS congenial, happy, hard-working and highly supportive."

Community Engagement:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (39%) and agree (37%) on a five point likert) responding students expressed support for the value of community engagement. However, a notable deviation in student submissions suggests some reservation in this support. This might be due to a perception that such "extracurricular" activities fall beyond the bounds of university education. However, this does not necessarily preclude a belief in the principle:

"University is meant to make us think and learn, and this should be the main focus. The rest should be secondary."

Yet, as a whole, the quantitative and qualitative feedback for both this and the previous value indicate a general enthusiasm for the promotion of opportunities for social engagement within the university.

Sustainability:

On average (and clustering around highly agree (54%) and agree (27%) on a five point likert) responding students expressed support for the value of sustainability. However, a notable deviation in student submissions suggests some reserve in this support.

Other Comments

It was also expressed in the comments as to the practical purpose behind these attributes:

"It would be good to have maybe a sentence or two (probably no more) explaining what these Attributes and values would mean. For example, if 'excellence in all activities' becomes an Attribute, would this mean students will be encouraged to excel in all areas? And what would the costs of these be? For this example, perhaps it could mean less funding for some bodies for re-allocation to other bodies."

"Not clear what this is about. Is it attributes that are developed, or attributes that ought to be developed."

To this effect, some thought should be given to the communication of graduate attributes, most notably with respect to how they might be applied within course settings, to the student body at large. Particular thought might be given as to whether such communications should be incorporated within classroom settings.